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The socio-political dynamics of secularism and epistemological injustice in global justice theory and practice

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the potential implications for the pursuit of global justice if certain non-secular ways of thinking, being in and responding to the world are devalued, marginalized and excluded by dominant secular norms that presently guide global justice theory and practice. I argue that pervasive assumptions about the nature of religion and the role that it should (or should not) play in public life undermine existing approaches to the pursuit of global justice in theory and practice. Specifically, I suggest that this dominance of secular assumptions constitutes a form of epistemological injustice that contributes to undermining efforts to address material injustices. I explore these issues through an examination of research and practice on global justice, utilizing specific examples from human rights, humanitarian aid and development, and forced migration. I conclude by considering some possible alternatives to dominant secular frames, though argue that these are still in need of further research and development to offer a useful alternative.

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KEYWORDS Religion; secularism; global justice; epistemological injustice; human rights; humanitarianism

1. Introduction

During a fieldwork visit to Malawi and South Africa in 2014, a colleague and I were conducting interviews with a variety of community leaders and members on the importance of religious beliefs, actors and organizations in developing responses to issues of gender inequality and gender-based violence in developing communities. These interviews ranged from

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women involved with local church organizations, political leaders, faith leaders, traditional chiefs and elders to leaders of children's activity groups, local charities and support organizations. One such interview was done with a police officer in a small community in KwaZulu Natal, approximately two hours' drive south-west of Durban. We entered the local police station and wandered around for a while, knocking on doors, trying to find the police officer who had agreed to be interviewed. After waiting for a while and beginning to wonder whether there had been some kind of mix-up, a door opened and a woman looked out. 'Hello, did you knock? I'm so sorry; I was having my moment of prayer. Do come in.'¹ We entered her small office and she told us that she was the Warrant Officer whom we were to interview. She offered us a seat, whilst arranging her desk. As we were waiting for her to be ready, we noticed a laptop on a shelf nearby playing a video with a pastor giving a sermon and a document about spiritual warfare pinned on the wall behind her.

We began by asking her some questions about the most significant crimes in the area, which she told us are assault and rape, most frequently of women. We then asked about the specific challenges that exist in the community around addressing these crimes and what she thinks are the most appropriate and effective ways to approach them. We then moved to the specific topic of religion – what role, if any, do or should religious leaders, institutions and organizations in the community play in addressing these problems? Is it important that they are involved? We were slightly taken aback by her response:

Definitely it is important. I believe pastors need to be informed because they will intervene with prayer. I believe we cannot fight crime without the involvement of the power of God. In prayer, my God tells me that there is nothing that we cannot do. It is very important; it is the first of all things that need to be engaged in by pastors.

From our background reading and research, we had frequently encountered the argument that religious leaders and organizations should be involved in addressing global justice issues such as gender inequality, human rights abuses, poverty and violence, because they are highly influential in their communities and often set an example for others to follow (Johnston and Sampson 1994; Appleby 2000; Barnet and Stein 2012). This, however, was the first time we had heard a public official argue,

¹Names have been withheld to protect privacy.

on the record, that religious leaders should be involved because of the importance of the spiritual realm in addressing these social and political issues.

I recount this story, not because it indicates the significance of religion in global justice issues such as gender inequality and violence on the ground, but rather because of the questions it raised for us as researchers. These questions concern the different ways issues of injustice are conceptualized and approached in the contemporary globalized context, especially with regard to the place of religion. We – two white, Western academics – did not expect that a police officer, a public figure and representative of the state, would openly and unabashedly discuss spirituality as a legitimate, even fundamental, primary response to problems of gender inequality and gender-based violence in the community. Such public expressions of religiosity are at odds with conceptions of the public domain and the responsibilities of actors representing the state and acting in the public domain that dominate political philosophy, sociology and International Relations approaches (Wilson 2012; Bartelink and Wilson 2014). They are also at odds with the worldviews and assumptions that dominate the foreign policy of European states that frequently finance projects aimed to combat global justice issues such as gender inequality. According to these perspectives, state actors should, as far as possible, be ‘neutral’ in their opinions, particularly when it comes to religion, and should be guided by ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’. Indeed, neutrality, reason and rationality are fundamental components of how Euro-American scholars and policy-makers understand fairness, equality and justice (Rawls 1988; Sen 2010) and how issues of global injustice are approached in policy and practice, particularly in the humanitarian aid and development sector (Ager and Ager 2011: 459, 461; Lynch 2011; Barnett and Stein 2012: 25).

Secularism has been and continues to be widely viewed as providing the guarantee for this neutrality as a guiding framework for policy deliberations in the public sphere (Casanova 1994, 2011; Ager and Ager 2011: 458–9). This is why public reason, as articulated by John Rawls, is a hallmark of much contemporary global justice theorizing (Sen 2010) and why emancipatory global justice movements, such as the World Social Forum (WSF), promote secularism and public reason as critical to the pursuit of global justice (Conway 2013).

Religion has largely been described as the antithesis of reason and rationality in literature on public justice, including global justice (Sen 2010; Wilson 2010, 2012; Ager and Ager 2011: 461). Yet, as numerous

scholars have highlighted, secularism is not always as neutral as is claimed. What is deemed as universally ‘reasonable’ and ‘rational’ according to a secular worldview is arguably partial and culturally specific (Eberle 2002: 313–4; Hurd 2008; Bretherton 2010a: 15). Indeed, certain forms of secularism can actively devalue, marginalize and exclude worldviews that do not adhere to secular norms and standards (Mavelli and Petito 2012: 931).

Building on these dilemmas, the central question I explore in this article is: What are the implications for the pursuit of global justice if certain non-secular ways of thinking, being in and responding to the world – ways of thinking and being that arguably characterize vast sections of the global population most directly affected by issues of global injustice² – are devalued, marginalized and excluded by dominant secular assumptions that presently guide global justice theory and practice? This question is relevant not only for the communities where non-secular views prevail, but also for so-called secular countries, such as those within Europe, who frequently provide the funding and personnel for projects that respond to issues of global injustice. I argue that certain pervasive secular norms about the nature of religion and the role that it should (or should not) play in public life, undermine existing approaches to global justice. Specifically, I suggest that the dominance of secular assumptions across global justice theory and practice constitutes a form of epistemological injustice – what De Sousa Santos (2005: xviii; see also Bennett 2007) has more violently described as ‘epistemicide’ – that contributes to undermining efforts to address material injustices. These dominant assumptions posit secular – understood as rational, material, physical, scientific, immanent, universal and predominantly Euro-American – perspectives, worldviews and actors as implicitly superior to religious – understood as spiritual, metaphysical, cosmological, transcendent, emotional, particular and predominantly non-Euro-American – perspectives, worldviews and actors. I further suggest that the very categories we presently use to make sense of religion and public life – religious, secular, public, private – in themselves construct hierarchies of knowledge and experience that lead to certain voices and perspectives

²The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012: 9) reported that 84% of the world’s population identified as ‘religiously affiliated’. The majority of these religiously affiliated people live outside the highly developed, prosperous, powerful – and largely secular – countries of Europe and North America (Pew Forum 2012: 10), and are daily affected by poverty, economic inequality, human rights abuses, conflict, violence, food insecurity and environmental degradation.

being privileged and others being excluded (Prokhovnik 2003; Wilson 2012).

This is not to suggest that secularism is the primary source of such exclusion and marginalization. Other issues are undoubtedly at play, such as racism, classism, neoliberalism and the historical legacy of colonialism (George 2004; De Sousa Santos 2005; Sen 2010; Conway 2013). Nonetheless, secularism is a contributing factor, yet one whose impact on global justice has to date been undertheorized. Indeed, the ways in which secularism intersects with these other forms of exclusion and the extent to which secular frameworks may provide conceptual and ideological support for colonialism, classism, neoliberalism and racism have only recently begun to be explored in greater depth (Asad 2003; Beaumont and Cloke 2010: 5; Bretherton 2010b: 214; Cloke 2010: 229; Lloyd and Viefhues-Bailey 2015).

In this article, I deal with several problems and challenges, specifically related to assumptions of secularism and how they affect efforts to pursue global justice. To begin, I outline some of the recent dynamics that have contributed to raising questions about the suitability of secularism to provide the most effective political framework for realizing equality and justice. From there, I discuss the main trends in research and practice on global justice and how secular assumptions are embedded here before discussing some examples of the problems I am raising with reference to human rights, humanitarian aid and development, and forced migration, three key areas of policy and practice where global justice is pursued. In closing, I briefly consider post-secularism, which has been posited as a potential alternative to secular approaches to enable the inclusion of presently excluded voices and perspectives, encouraging greater understanding, collaboration and cooperation, and moving towards conditions that facilitate greater equality and justice.

2. Secularism

Secular approaches to public life are arguably bound up with questions of justice and equality. In democratic societies that are highly diverse and plural regarding both immanent and transcendent worldviews, secularism in its various guises attempts to manage relationships between these competing worldviews in order to provide the best circumstances for the pursuit of the common good (Ager and Ager 2011: 458). In its original nineteenth-century incarnation, secularism was not hostile to religion, but rather protective towards it, offering a means through which believers

could be given sufficient freedom to resolve moral questions according to their own conscience, without unnecessary interference from the state (Asad 2003: 23–4; Kmiec 2015: 41). Much has changed since then, with regard to religion, secularism and society as a whole. New challenges have emerged that highlight the vulnerabilities and shortcomings of secularism, alongside its potential to also marginalize and exclude people, raising questions regarding its utility in its current dominant form.

The first challenge that has raised questions about secularism is the recognition of its ideological character (Casanova 1994, 2011; Kuru 2007; Hurd 2008). Within sociology of religion, political philosophy, religious studies and International Relations, scholars now widely recognize that secularism is not the neutral, universal arbiter of reason and political deliberation that it is often claimed to be (Eberle 2002; Mavelli 2012; Wilson 2012). Rather, it is a highly specific, culturally embedded model for managing the relationship between religion and politics, albeit one that has now become influential across many diverse regions of the world (Gutkowski 2014: 6).

The recognition of these dimensions leads to a further realization that certain forms of secularism are not just about the judicial and political arrangements for managing religion's relationship with politics, but are underpinned by an ideological agenda that makes assumptions about the worth of religious belief and practice in relation to other human pursuits, about the existence and value of immanent and transcendent realms, about the very nature of religion itself (Hurd 2008). Such assumptions include the idea that religion is a distinct and separate field of human activity that can be separated out from politics, economics and culture (Asad 2002: 116); that there are public and private domains that can be separated from one another (Taylor 2009); that religion is a private individual and largely irrational activity, best confined to the private sphere; that religions are primarily organized socially via institutions (Wilson 2012). These assumptions impact the way in which some states, especially Euro-American states, behave in world politics. They shape how states engage with religious actors. They influence how Euro-American states in particular interact with other states where religion is more central than it is in Euro-American secular worldviews. Finally, these assumptions about religion shape how states carry out their policies. In addition, these assumptions underpin global governance structures and frameworks aimed at addressing issues of injustice, including human rights violations, aid and development, displacement and protection, climate change, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, amongst a host of others (Gutkowski

2014: 6). Secular assumptions are deeply embedded within these global governance frameworks and are internalized and reproduced by actors that self-identify as religious and as secular alike (Lynch 2011; Barnett and Stein 2012). It is only now that scholars are beginning to explore how secularism as an ideology has affected a variety of different areas of global politics and re-examine assumptions about religion's role in global civil society and about religion itself.

The second challenge that has contributed to undermining secularism is the impact of globalization, and particularly neoliberal globalization, on the nature and reach of both secularism and the position of the nation-state in global politics. As Peter Beyer (2013: 664) has argued, 'the default unit of analysis or observation is no longer the local, regional, national and in most instances western society, but rather global society as a whole'. Globalization contributes to increasing interconnections across state borders and the emergence of multiple public spheres that overlap and intersect at various different levels of global civil society (Fraser 2006). These multifarious and overlapping public spheres necessarily affect the nature of secularism, since secularism is both constituted by and constitutive of the public/private divide (Taylor 2009: 1149; Wilson 2012: 49–51). In this context, secularism cannot be seen only as a form of statecraft, but must also be considered as a normative framework that shapes human activity across different contexts.

An additional impact has been the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology governing state and inter-state economics. The relationship between neoliberal and secular assumptions has to date rarely been explored in depth. Their mutual foregrounding of rationalism and the material world, however, suggest that exploring this relationship may be a fruitful avenue of enquiry for expanding our understanding of both neoliberalism and secularism and their public socio-political dynamics (During 2010; Mueller 2011: 379, 383). As neoliberalism has gained increasing power at the national and international levels, alternative forms of globalization have emerged such as grassroots resistance to the inequalities and injustices brought about by neoliberal globalization. Prevailing forms of analysis of these dynamics have undervalued the role of religious actors and worldviews, affected by secular assumptions (Conway 2013: 156). Indeed, there has been a dominant attitude that religion is incompatible with resistance movements, since these are associated with progressive politics, and religion is often assumed to be highly conservative (Conway 2013). Such assumptions are misleading, as the plethora of religious organizations engaged with progressive social

justice issues and movements attests (Beaumont and Cloke 2010; Wilson 2010; Wilson and Steger 2013). Religion cannot easily be classified as either an obstacle or a conduit for the pursuit of justice and social transformation, since it is frequently entangled with both (Wilson and Steger 2013). Such efforts at classification are also potentially futile, since it is not religions that have agency to obstruct or promote justice, but people. Thus, it may be more constructive to move away from such categorization attempts and instead seek to engage, deeply and continually, with 'religion' and all its various actors and dimensions in contextually sensitive ways.

3. Global injustice and spiritual justice

Questions of global justice have taken on increasing significance in the twenty-first century, with greater interconnection between and across states and new issues of injustice being identified as a result of increasing global consciousness and the expansion of the public sphere beyond the borders of the state (Tarrow 2005; Fraser 2006; Steger 2008). Within scholarly literature, global justice is frequently addressed from two distinct but interrelated angles. The first is predominantly philosophical, while the second focuses more on issues and social movements. Within the philosophical literature, scholars of global justice and its related terms of international and transnational justice explore the theoretical and ethical arguments and justifications for who bears primary responsibility for inequalities and injustices and what actions should be taken to address these (Beitz 2010; O'Neill 2010; Caney 2011). These writings often privilege the state and the individual as the primary units of analysis (Singer 2010), with some consideration of intergovernmental agencies (Pogge 2010). A key area of contestation in the theoretical literature is that between communitarians and cosmopolitans, whether questions of justice should extend beyond the boundaries of communities, such as states, or whether they need to take into consideration humanity as a whole (Wilson 2014). Yet, this literature also questions whether such a universal approach is possible given the myriad cultural, ethical, philosophical, political, ideological and religious worldviews that color how such issues are addressed across the globe (Wilson 2010). A key characteristic of this literature is its emphasis on secular public reason and rationality as the most appropriate framework through which questions of global justice should be debated and decided (Rawls 1988; Sen 2010).

Conversely, literature focused on global justice from an issues and social movement-driven perspective, whilst still focusing on states, is also interested in the responsibilities carried by transnational actors, such as corporations, and intergovernmental agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the United Nations and so forth, as well as emphasizing the importance of grassroots community perspectives on issues of global justice. This literature often comes from scholar-activists writing from within the global justice movement itself (Bello 1999; George 2004; Tarrow 2005; Conway 2013). This body of literature has also encouraged consideration of questions of historical, inter-generational, cultural and climate (in)justice alongside judicial, philosophical and moral approaches (Steger et al. 2013). As Conway (2013) has noted, these movements are frequently embedded in the progressive emancipatory political ideologies of modernity, such as Marxism, socialism and feminism, all of which are highly secular and often anti-religious.

Both the philosophical and social movement approaches have something to offer in terms of the questions they raise, the issues they focus on and the actors they analyze. In the contemporary globalized, highly interconnected context, it is becoming increasingly necessary to take into consideration social, political, economic, cultural and historical dynamics across local, national, regional, transnational, international and global levels. This requires the adoption of broader, multi-scalar notions of justice. These should not be understood as a hierarchy of scales, separate and distinct from each other, as Saskia Sassen (2003: 7) has pointed out, but as embedded in and entangled with one another. It also suggests that cosmopolitan approaches may be more suited to the contemporary globalized setting than communitarian approaches. I have elsewhere engaged with some of the ethical and philosophical questions around global justice and suggested that it is necessary to retain a fluid sense of what justice is, a continual process, constantly being refined, not an end-point (Wilson 2010). Approaches to global justice must contain both universal and specific, particular dimensions, consistent with Sassen's multi-scalar analysis. It cannot simply focus on the individual or the state, but must be concerned with both individuals and communities (and not just nation-states, but families, local villages, regions and transnational communities) and all of these actors must be both subjects and agents of justice processes. Finally, concepts and practices of justice must be developed through critical reflection on both theory and experience (Wilson 2010).

The philosophical and social movement approaches share a primary concern with questions of global economic inequality and human rights abuses, what might be described as material and immanent injustices. There is far less discussion of epistemological issues of injustice in either approach. The scholarly literature feeds into and interacts with a number of different areas of activity in relation to policy and practice. This includes humanitarian aid and development work, where issues of economic inequality and human rights abuses are a central focus, global economic and trade policies, as well as protest and resistance movements, such as the WSF. They also share an implicit embedded privileging of secular assumptions and worldviews, which arguably marginalizes alternative non-secular perspectives (Wilson 2010; Conway 2013).³

This predominance of secular assumptions is evident in the emphasis on reason and rationality, but also in the very issues that global justice theorists and activists focus on, mainly immanent questions of material, political and juridical inequality. Yet, these are not the only issues of inequality and injustice that communities around the world consider pressing, since it excludes consideration of transcendental justice. Where actors operating from within a religious or cosmological worldview are concerned, I suggest it is also necessary to acknowledge the claims to justice for what I shall call spiritual injustices. Spiritual injustices violate what a religious group perceives should be the established or desired cosmic order or natural reality. There are obviously degrees of scale in this. Some religious actors will hold understandings of reality that are relatively easy to reconcile with religious actors from different belief systems or with secular actors – the Parliament of the World's Religions provides an example of this – participants in the Parliament desire a more just, equitable and peaceful world, but do so for different reasons (Parliament of the World's Religions 2006). These different justifications create tension

³It is important to clarify my critique of the WSF here. I am not suggesting that the WSF is *only* a secularist space. Numerous religious actors and organizations participate in WSF activities and actions, and indeed there have been special sessions at previous WSFs exploring the role of religion in social and political transformation (my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this). However, the emphasis that religion is something separate and distinct from the secular is part and parcel of a secularist perspective (Asad 2003). Non-secular worldviews do not divide the world up according to categories of 'religion' and 'secular'. Further, the fact that there have been special sessions that specifically address the role of religion in social and political transformation suggests that there is a prior assumption that religion *does not* contribute to these things, or at least that there is a question mark about whether religion does contribute or not. By contrast, as far as I have been able to determine there has been no special session on the role of secularism in social and political transformation, for example, precisely because secularism is automatically assumed to contribute to these things, or to simply be the neutral space in which contestation over social and political transformation occurs. These are examples of what I am referring to when I suggest that secular worldviews are privileged in WSF spaces.

and debate but are not impossible to overcome (Brink 2003: 17). Others will be vastly, perhaps irreconcilably, different. ISIS, Al-Qaeda, the Army of God and a number of other what might be labeled fundamentalist or radicalized⁴ groups provide examples here. A significant part of the problem of global justice, then, is reconciling the multiple worldviews and competing or contradictory understandings of shared concepts. As noted above, while secular approaches endeavor to provide this shared language for addressing questions of immanent injustice, there is at present little space for worldviews and analyses that take seriously spiritual injustices, or spiritual responses to material injustices, such as that of the policewoman in the encounter I shared at the beginning of this article. This may compound existing forms of marginalization and exclusion, arising from the influence of racism, sexism, colonialism and neoliberalism, or may generate new forms of marginalization and exclusion. In a globalized context where most individuals and communities operate from within worldviews where the spiritual and the transcendental are critical, the exclusion of such approaches arguably constitutes a form of epistemological injustice that contributes to undermining efforts to address material injustices (De Sousa Santos 2005; Conway 2013: xvii).

4. Secularism and global (in)justice in practice

I now briefly explore ways in which secular assumptions permeate practice-related aspects of global justice, with specific reference to human rights, humanitarian aid and development, and forced migration, contributing to epistemological injustice. As Ager and Ager (2011: 457) highlight, secular assumptions frame public discourses of humanitarianism leading to a marginalization and privatization of religious beliefs, practices, actors and assumptions. These assumptions include a privileging of the rational and the material over the emotional and the spiritual regarding what needs and perspectives are prioritized. Further, they suggest, the dominance of secularism privileges certain (neo-)liberal materialist assumptions (Ager and Ager 2011: 457).

Two interviewees referred independently to this marginalization of the religious and the spiritual during our fieldwork in Malawi. A community leader from one of the villages spoke of the importance of spirituality: 'In our life there are several areas we need, one of them is spiritual, without

⁴'Radicalization' is the dominant term used to describe such groups, however this label should, I suggest, be viewed critically. 'Radical' can refer to any number of different organizations and approaches from 'radical' peace activists, to 'radical' environmentalists, as well as 'radical' terrorist groups.

that we cannot make it.’ A local program manager working in the same area with World Vision Malawi voiced a similar observation: ‘As human beings we are soul, spirit and body, but we [development workers and the government] forget the spiritual and the soul. The spiritual influences how you think and act.’⁵ Such a statement from an employee of a faith-based development agency is revealing. It highlights how much the development sector privileges the secular, to the point that faith-based agencies themselves are to an extent complicit in privileging secular perspectives over religious ones. Religion becomes instrumentalized, a means to an end, rather than part of the fabric of a community.

This instrumentalization of religion is arguably representative of a deeper entanglement between secular and neoliberal worldviews. As Cecelia Lynch (2011) and Michael Barnet and Janice Gross Stein (2012) have highlighted, in the contemporary humanitarian sector, identities and practices of NGOs, secular and religious, are shaped to a large degree by (neo)liberal market policies and practices. Indeed, Hopgood and Vinjamuri (2012: 39) argue that faith-based organizations (FBOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) in the humanitarian aid sector are best understood as firms operating in a market context. As states increasingly outsource their services to private contractors and civil society organizations, these actors are required to conform to specific sets of market-based criteria in order to access funding support, as well as catering their programs to the desires of the state, thereby becoming part of the governance mechanisms orchestrated by states and intergovernmental organizations (Lynch 2011: 213–4). ‘Organizations are increasingly rationalized, bureaucratized, and professionalized, that is, they are introducing modern secular operating practices’ (Barnet and Stein 2012: 24). Yet, these processes can intrude on spirituality and are viewed by some faith-based humanitarian actors with suspicion as secularization by other means (Ngo 2015). While Barnet and Stein (2012: 24f.) suggest that organizations may adopt secularization as a strategy, giving the example of Islamic Relief following the events of 9/11, the question

⁵It is important to note that, just as multiple interpretations and meanings are applied to the term ‘religion’ and these can only be studied and properly analyzed in context, the same is true for concepts of ‘prayer’, ‘soul’ and ‘spirituality’. Black, feminist and liberation theologies have all emphasized the diversity of understandings of these and other theological concepts and the need for critical self-reflexivity, as well as appreciating that these concepts and, in the case of prayer, actions, do not mean the same thing either within or across different religious traditions. Arguably, they do not mean the same thing from one individual to another (e.g. Russell 1974; Smith 1991; Cone 2010).

arises as to what extent agencies are *forced* to adopt secularization as a strategy in order to survive.

Despite an increased interest in and willingness to engage with religious actors across the humanitarian sector in recent years, this engagement has primarily focused on the ‘added value’ that religious actors can bring to pre-existing, predominantly secular and (Western) state-driven humanitarian aid and development programs (Ager and Ager 2011: 460). Rather than generating space for religious beliefs and practices within the predominantly secular humanitarian sector, such practices run the risk of deepening the division between religious and secular actors and perspectives. It contributes to a fear of instrumentalization on the part of FBOs (Karam 2012: 10f.) and approaches that view FBOs as assets in the pursuit of secular development goals (Karam 2012: 20) – utilizing volunteer and fundraising networks that FBOs often have through their faith communities, for example, or the influence religious leaders frequently have in local communities, without engaging deeply, seriously and respectfully with their core beliefs (Ager and Ager 2011: 460). Faith-based actors are either increasingly defining themselves in secular terms (Lynch 2011; Hopgood and Vinjamuri 2012: 38) or defining themselves as religious communities rather than humanitarian civil society organizations to avoid having to ‘professionalize/secularize’, despite their primary activities being the provision of humanitarian aid and relief (Ngo 2015).

Some scholars and practitioners argue that this is a good thing, because it reduces the possibilities for proselytizing and the exploitation of vulnerable people by religious groups eager for converts (Hopgood and Vinjamuri 2012: 38; Karam 2012: 10). While this is indeed a danger to be wary of, this view fails to recognize that secular humanitarian practices, with their awareness-raising activities, can be just as normative, biased and exclusionary as religious ones and can in some respects be viewed as equally exploitative (Ager and Ager 2011: 264–5). Advocating the principle of neutrality in humanitarianism is an important part of enabling actors to provide the aid that is desperately needed. Yet, there is a sense in which it may be more problematic to insist on the appearance of neutrality, since this to some extent discourages critique of normative views and assumptions associated with neutrality – for example, that secularism is the best means for ensuring neutrality. Perhaps rather than neutrality, a guiding principle for humanitarianism and for global justice more broadly could be critical self-reflexivity, openly acknowledging and then critically reflecting on how our own deeply held beliefs and assumptions, regardless

of whether they emanate from religious, philosophical, political or ideological traditions, affect our ideas and actions.

Many of these tensions between secularism, neoliberalism, religion and justice in the humanitarian sector are underpinned by similar tensions regarding human rights more generally. The historical antagonism between the Western secular conception of human rights and religious approaches to these same rights and concepts of human dignity continues to influence debates and practices today, particularly in the post-9/11 global 'war on terror' environment. Secular approaches tend to assume that religions must be reformed in order to 'fit' with global human rights standards enshrined in international law (Freeman 2004). This is to a large extent because, in both contemporary human rights theory and governance and the humanitarian sector more broadly, neutrality is held to be one of the most important values to ensure equal treatment and fair provision of services and, so the argument goes, only secularism is capable of providing such neutrality. 'A secular approach to human rights is adequate, even necessary, in view of the world's diversity of religious and philosophical beliefs. This assumes, however, that secularism is *neutral* between these beliefs. This is precisely what some religious believers dispute' (Freeman 2004: 385).

Approaches to human rights in theory and practice carry the implicit assumption that secular approaches to human rights provide the neutrality necessary for fairly and adequately upholding and protecting people's rights, often against the threats to those rights posed by religious institutions and actors. However, this does not allow for the possibility, as Freeman (2004: 85) highlights, that 'the appeal of religions such as Islam may be *precisely* that they seem to their adherents to protect human dignity *under modern conditions*, especially the modern condition of Western economic, political and cultural hegemony'. This Western hegemony includes an emphasis on secularism as the most appropriate framework for promoting and protecting human dignity. Yet, while some forms of secularism provide an effective way for mediating differences between religious and philosophical worldviews, in other forms it can itself be a form of exclusion, violence and oppression (Mavelli and Petito 2012: 931).

Moving to consider the issue of displacement and forced migration, religion usually features in discussions of this topic in one of two forms – either as one of the driving factors of conflict and violence that forces people to flee and become displaced, or as one of the key sources of assistance for refugees through FBOs that provide relief and

support for refugees and asylum seekers in camps and in resettlement countries (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011). This in itself highlights one of the more pervasive implicit effects of secular assumptions – that religion is defined as either bad or good, often depending on the extent to which it is seen to oppose or support broader, largely secularist norms. Casting religion's role in only these two avenues buys into the 'good religion, bad religion' narrative that has become a common place of contemporary politics (Hurd 2012). 'Good religion' contributes to global (secular) human rights standards, justice, compassion and upholding human dignity; 'bad religion' creates intolerance, exclusion, violence and chaos. Such simplistic black and white categorizations obscure complex dynamics of power and exclusion that are embedded within the discourses and frameworks that we use to talk about contemporary, state-centric global politics. For example, when thinking about the needs of displaced people, the prevailing focus is on their physical needs. Yet, within religious worldviews, such as some versions of Islam, the spiritual dimensions of people's lives are as important and require as much attention as the physical. This is not to say that the protection of people's spiritual needs should take priority over their physical needs, but that the two should be given equal weight (Aminu-Kano and Atallah FitzGibbon 2014: 12ff.).

This subordination of the spiritual to the physical is related to the entanglements between the secular/religious divide and the public/private divide within the humanitarian aid and development sector more broadly. Secularism and its associated assumptions of a clear division between secular and religious and public and private is part of this production of power imbalances that contribute to silencing alternative (non-Western) perspectives on global problems, including migration and economic inequality (Conway 2013: 156), and may in part contribute to the exclusion of the perceptions and voices of displaced and marginalized people themselves. As such, we must be very careful about excluding worldviews that take seriously the spiritual, metaphysical, supernatural and transcendent, in which these dimensions of the human experience are not partitioned off from the rest of life but are deeply embedded and entangled with daily realities. Such exclusions devalue the ways of thinking and being of vast sections of the global population, silencing their voices and limiting their sources of empowerment and agency in what must be global conversations (De Sousa Santos 2005; Ager and Ager 2011; Conway 2013).

5. Global justice beyond secularism?

In view of these multifarious consequences arising from the marginalization of non-secular voices from theories and practices of global justice, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners across both secular and non-secular worldviews should explore potential alternatives that can make space for these previously excluded perspectives. I briefly consider the emerging post-secular approach that has become influential across a number of fields as part of the critique of secularism more generally. The work of Jürgen Habermas (2006) has been one of the main catalysts for the engagement with post-secularism. He argues that, to a large extent, the criteria for public reason that govern contemporary political debate in the public sphere, including theories and approaches to global justice, are premised on key assumptions of secularization theory (Habermas 2006: 2f.-). As is now well established, however, the predictions of secularization theory have largely not come to fruition. Religion, variously understood, is not dying out, but is taking on new significance and alternative forms (Casanova 1994; Hurd 2008; Beyer 2013). In this post-secular society, Habermas (2006: 8f.) argues, we must rethink the parameters of acceptable public reasoning and debate and in particular reassess the requirements that have been placed on religious citizens. A post-secular society requires a process of mutual learning and translation for secular and religious citizens alike and a shift to a post-metaphysical approach that, for Habermas, does not make normative judgements on religious truth claims but nonetheless distinguishes between faith and knowledge. Such a shift in public reasoning has significant implications for global justice theory and practice.

Yet, as many scholars have noted, Habermas' engagement with the post-secular is still largely done through a secularist lens. His solution to the inequality of public debate is that instead of asking religious citizens to translate their arguments into secular language, both religious and secular citizens must translate their public arguments into a language that is universal and acceptable to all. Yet, this language remains that of secular reason (Mavelli and Petito 2012: 936; Pabst 2012: 1003f.; Birnbaum 2015). While aiming to rehabilitate religion in the public sphere, Habermas' proposal is still very much embedded in and confined by the terms of the secular. In contrast, Mavelli and Petito (2012) have articulated the post-secular, not as a description of present societal conditions, but as

a form of radical theorizing and critique prompted by the idea that values such as democracy, freedom, equality, inclusion, and justice may not necessarily be best pursued within an exclusively immanent secular framework. Quite the opposite, the secular may well be a potential site of isolation, domination, violence, and exclusion. (Mavelli and Petito 2012: 931)

The post-secular critique destabilizes categories of 'religious' and 'secular', 'public' and 'private', 'rational' and 'irrational', emphasizing that such categories are largely historically, socially and culturally constructed (Bretherton 2010a: 15). The emergence of the post-secular critique represents part of a shift in sensibilities away from secular assumptions about what is rational and acceptable public reason, indeed, that the distinctions between public and private reason are themselves products of secular ideology and that such neat, clean divisions do not exist in reality.

Yet to date, the post-secular critique and the recognition of the partial and subjective nature of secularism remain largely confined to academia and are yet to permeate policy and practice. Indeed, arguably this recognition remains confined to a niche area of scholarship on religion, politics and public life. Further, while I am sympathetic and indebted to the post-secular critique, I am unconvinced of its utility as an alternative to secularism. As the critiques of the Habermasian approach suggest, the post-secular is still in many ways too deeply entrenched in secular modes of thinking to enable it to go beyond critique. Similar to decolonial critiques of modernism and post-modernism (Dussel 2012: 37),⁶ post-secularism to some extent remains a provincial or internal critique of a phenomenon that developed initially in the European context. In order to develop more radical versions of post-secularism, it is necessary to consult external non-European critiques of the secular. Further, like all 'post' iterations, post-secularism carries with it the implicit suggestion of a chronological progression from secularism to that which comes 'after secularism', as though we can clearly move from one historical age (the secular) to another (the post-secular) (Conway 2013). The post-secular turn is an important step along the way towards alternative frameworks for thinking about how questions of the transcendent, the spiritual and the metaphysical are entangled with and impact on various different aspects of human existence in the contemporary age. However, its contribution may be limited to critique, not necessarily to transformation.

There are other possible alternatives that could be considered, such as William Connolly's (2005) multidimensional pluralism, or relational

⁶I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting Dussel's work.

dialogism (Wilson 2010, 2012). The philosophy of liberation, pioneered by Leopoldo Zea, Augusto Salazar Bondy and decolonial thinkers such as Enrique Dussel (1985, 1996, 2012), as a direct challenge to the assumptions of modernity that plague much of Habermas' work, offers perhaps the most promising avenue for developing alternatives to secular world-views because it is external to the Euro-American secular context. Indeed, their efforts to move beyond the modernist and post-modernist frameworks, resulting in trans-modernity, may provide a model for surpassing the secularist paradigm (Dussel 2012: 41).

Perhaps, however, before we begin exploring alternatives, it is also important to understand more fully the impacts of secular assumptions on specific issues related to global justice and on the daily lived experiences of people around the world. Additional research is required into exactly how secular assumptions about religion affect the lives of displaced persons in refugee camps; families and communities working with both secular and religious development agencies; programs and policies addressing gender inequality and gender-based violence; and efforts to promote action on climate change and mobilize resistance to neoliberalism. The full extent of the impact of secular assumptions on the foreign and development policies of European states and NGOs that often fund and implement initiatives aimed at addressing global injustices has also to date not been extensively theorized. Fully appreciating the ways in which certain forms of secularism exclude and marginalize people at the levels of policy, practice and daily life will contribute to the reform of global justice institutions, theories and practices and the development of alternative approaches. It must also be acknowledged that the issues and concepts I have discussed here – the public sphere, the nation-state, global civil society, justice, displacement, development – are concepts and problems defined by, arguably even created by, the Euro-American secular worldview. Other perspectives will not see the world in terms of these categories or problems, not to mention simply having different priorities for what the main crises and challenges are (De Sousa Santos 2005). In any global justice agenda, these kinds of differences must be acknowledged and given space in order to prevent global epistemological injustices from undermining the pursuit of global social justice.

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